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ABSTRACT

Two hypotheses were posed in a study that examined the communicative consequences of structured versus nonstructured tasks on subjects with varying levels of communication apprehension (CA): (1) task structure and level of CA will interact to predict behavioral disruption in dyads, and (2) CA and evaluation will interact to predict behavioral disruption. Seventy-nine confederate/subject dyads were composed of randomly selected basic communication students, all of whom had completed a communication apprehension measure. Dyads were divided into situations with high and low potential for outside evaluation, and with a structured or unstructured task. Interactions were videotaped for eight minutes. Results indicated that communication performance was variably influenced by evaluation potential and the amount of structure of the task. The communication of high CAs was disrupted by evaluation, but less so if task structure provided guidance. Low CAs were less debilitated by evaluation, but showed more behavioral disruption on a highly structured task. (Suggestions for structure-added and structure-reduced communication assignments to enhance the learning environment of students with varying levels of communication apprehension are included, as are tables of data from the study.) (HOD)

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Stifle or Stimulate?

The Effects of Communication Task Structure on Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Students

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Abstract

The structure of communication assignments is an aspect of the class environment almost completely within the control of the educator, yet it is often overlooked as an influence on apprehensive and non-apprehensive students. Although there are indications that structured tasks are helpful to apprehensive students, less attention has been directed toward potential debilitative effects of structure on non-apprehensive students. The results of this study suggest an interaction between trait CA and task structure. Suggestions for structure-added and structure-reduced communication assignments are outlined to enhance the learning environment of students with varying levels of communication apprehension.

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Stifle or Stimulate?
The Effects of Communication Task Structure on Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Students

Educators face a dilemma every time they design a communication assignment. How much structure should the assigned task provide? If the assignment is overly structured students will not have the freedom to be creative, but if the assignment fails to provide sufficient structure students may flounder and not utilize concepts or skills expected by the teacher.

The dilemma becomes increasingly complex when the concern of communication apprehension is added. The apprehensive student is one who experiences fear or anxiety when faced with communicating (McCroskey, 1977). Therefore, in addition to learning the "regular" communication skills expected in a classroom, these students must also overcome the fear engendered by entering into a communication interaction with a not-well-known other.

It is evident that situational variables also affect the experience of apprehension. The structure of a communication task is one such situational variable which may either facilitate or hinder effective performance. The impact of structure is made more complex since it appears to affect non-anxious students in different ways than anxious students. This article 1) reviews aspects of the educational environment which impact on apprehensive students, 2) specifically examines the influence of task structure on student performance, and 3) suggests ways structure can be used effectively to enhance communication competence among students with a variety of need levels, specifically those with high or low communication apprehension.

Educational Environment

To the apprehensive student the fear or anxiety associated with communicating may overwhelm the desire or ability to learn. This often results in students who are non-participative, unpopular as social or work partners, and who receive lower evaluations from teachers (see McCroskey, 1977; 1984 for an extensive review of these effects).

The communication apprehension and avoidance literature offers many suggestions for both coping with apprehensive students in the classroom and alleviating students' anxiety. Treatment programs designed to reduce anxiety through a variety of methods exist at some universities (Cohen, 1980; Glaser, 1981; Goss, Thompson, & Olds, 1978; Hoffman & Sprague, 1982). Although the various treatment programs appear comparably effective in reducing individuals' communication apprehension (Watson & Dodd, 1984), even at the college level only 6.8% of responding schools had anxiety-treatment programs. Most respondents felt it was a problem to be handled in the classroom (Hoffman & Sprague, 1982). Even fewer elementary or secondary schools have the luxury of such a support program. Thus despite the existence of treatment programs, most educators must teach students both high and low in communication apprehension in a single classroom environment.

Classroom management is of primary concern because tasks which are appropriate for non-apprehensive students may not work well, or may even be damaging, with highly apprehensive students (McCroskey, 1980). For example, Greene and Sparks (1983) and Arkin and Schumann (1983), found that evaluativeness

influenced high and low anxious subjects differently. The potential for evaluation in the setting was not particularly worrisome to low CA subjects. It can be surmised that these students consistently experience success in communicating and therefore expect evaluation to be positive. In contrast, the evaluation potential was very disruptive for high CA subjects. When evaluation was low, high CA's communicated normally. In fact Arkin and Schuman found shy subjects performed in an outgoing manner if they believed the setting precluded failure. But as evaluation increased the communication of apprehensive subjects deteriorated. These apprehensive students seem to chronically expect evaluations to be negative and anxiety over evaluation interacts with fear of communicating itself to inhibit communication. For this reason advice on classroom management which advocates reducing evaluation whenever possible seems sound. (Kougl, 1980, offers helpful suggestions).

Certainly there are anxiety-provoking practices which teachers can easily avoid: making examples of students by using oral criticisms, heightening threat by inviting new audiences to hear student speeches, or forcing an obviously terrified student to remain standing when all thought of the speech has flown. But communication professionals also provide constructive suggestions for dealing with apprehensive students in the classroom.

Suggestions for coping with quiet or anxious students generally center around class activities designed to build a warm supportive classroom environment (Adler, 1980) or the use of group work to diffuse the conspicuousness of a typical public speaking setting (Kougl, 1980). Some even advocate providing alternatives to all oral presentations so that apprehensive students need not fear being graded in these anxiety-provoking situations (McCroskey, 1980).

Daly and Lawrence (1984) suggest that apprehensive students tend to over-focus on internal factors rather than attending to audience or context aspects which might facilitate performance. Apprently the traditional advice to focus on people in your audience rather than on yourself should be especially helpful to anxious students--providing they can indeed transfer their attention. This may not be advice upon which apprehensive students can act.

However, there are elements in most communication situations which provoke anxiety. Aspects which may heighten anxiety in a public speaking setting include lack of knowledge about a speech assignment or setting, an audience which appears uninterested or openly hostile, or an audience perceived to be more skilled or of higher status than the speaker (Daly & Buss, 1984). Thus there are factors in the speaking environment which instructors cannot control and which may exacerbate students' apprehension.

Suggestions to minimize evaluation in a classroom in order to accomodate apprehensive students tend to be problematic. Restructuring a course to fit the needs of students for whom CA is a serious barrier to learning is typically not practical. The nature of classrooms in most educational systems demands some type of evaluation. Thus, regardless of the extent to which a class focuses on group work, or how supportive the class climate, assigning grades to communicative performance cannot entirely be avoided. Therefore, while evaluativeness can be reduced it probably cannot be removed from the educational setting.

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Influence of Task

Task structure is an area over which classroom instructors have complete control and as such constitutes an area where they can make a distinct different in student learning. Task structure is also a major concern to most students in basic college communication courses (Hiemstra & Staton-Spicer, 1983; Lederman, 1983). In addition the structure of communication assignments has been shown to influence people differently depending upon whether the people are high or low anxious.

Pilkonis (1977) found that shy subjects performed just as effectively as non-shy subjects when given a structured task. Daly and Buss (1984) also note that increasing structure reduces ambiguity for anxious subjects, and increases their chances to perform competently. But there is also concern about the extent to which highly structured assignments impact upon the performance of non-anxious students. It may be that the very structure which guides and assists apprehensive students may stifle or inhibit non-apprehensive students' typically competent performance.

The study reported here examined the communicative consequences of structured vs. non-structured tasks on subjects with varying levels of CA. Two hypotheses were posed.

H: 1. TASK STRUCTURE and level of CA will interact to predict behavioral disruption in dyads.

H: 2. CA and EVALUATION will interact to predict behavioral disruption. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of statistical significance.

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects were randomly selected from basic communication courses at a midwestern university. The study was conducted early in the term to minimize potential impact of the communication courses. All students completed the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982) during regular class periods prior to participation in the experiment. A random sample of all possible subjects was individually contacted to arrange participation times. Seventy-nine confederate/subject dyads were completed for analysis (33 males, 46 females, mean age = 21).

Procedure

Participants and confederates were met by the experimentor in the waiting room, escorted to the lab, and seated in pre-arranged chairs. Videotaping was accomplished behind a mirror in the wall of the room.

All dyads were randomly assigned to experimental condition. After explaining the study and procedures, the experimentor left the room and activated the videotape recorder. After eight minutes elapsed, the experimentor returned, administered a manipulation check on the experimental inductions and de-briefed all participants.

Independent Variables

Evaluation

The first manipulated variable was situational evaluation (EVAL). One way to vary the impact of a situation is to place people in a setting with high potential for evaluation (Daly & Buss, 1984; Green & Sparks, 1983).

In the low EVAL situation subjects were told they were completing the dyad for a study on communication while getting acquainted. They could view the videotapes for their own feedback if they chose, but no other use would be made of the tape. Thus evaluation was minimized by the private and nonjudgemental nature of the setting.

In the high EVAL situation subjects were told the tapes would be evaluated by communication faculty members and used as examples in communication courses. Extensive validation and pilot testing of the evaluation manipulation indicated that subjects viewed the high EVAL situation as substantially more evaluative and threatening than the low EVAL situation.

Task Structure

The second independent variable, task structure (TASK), had two levels, "structured" and "unstructured." Both versions of the task were adapted from the "Dyadic Encounter" exercise (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1974) commonly used in interpersonal communication courses as a get acquainted activity.

The exercise was subsequently modified to fulfill the requirements of this project. Several items which emphasized anxiety were removed to avoid confounding task and situational variables. Items were re-written in the third person to avoid forced self-disclosure, and some items were eliminated to fit time restrictions. Following task validation procedures and pilot testing it was determined that both versions of the task represented the same concepts and that differences in task structure were clear to participants.[1]

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension was operationalized by scores on the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982). Reported internal reliabilities for this scale range from .85 to .95 indicating a highly stable instrument and judging from numerous studies reported predictive validity is high (McCroskey, 1984). Obtained alpha was .93.

Dependent Variable

Behavioral Disruption

The dependent variable under examination was behavioral disruption (BD). Five behaviors regularly associated with CA or reticence in the literature were summed to form an index of behavioral disruption. The behaviors included: number of WORDS SPOKEN, lengthy PAUSES or SILENCES, GAZE AVOIDANCE, DISFLUENCIES, and DISCLAIMERS.

Lengthy pauses were operationalized as a pause during the subject's turn lasting 3 or more seconds (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). Gaze avoidance was the

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amount of time spent looking away from the confederate, disfluencies were any word which was stammered, repeated, or appeared difficult to produce, and disclaimers were statements by the subject which were apologetic or denied responsibility for the communication (e.g. "I'm no expert on this but..."). Both disfluencies and disclaimers were adjusted for proportion of time talked. The word count variable was transformed in analysis prior to summing in order to be directionally consistent with other coded behaviors such that a higher word count indicated more behavioral disruption. All behavioral counts were converted to z scores prior to summation in order to prevent over-weighing frequently occurring behaviors (e.g. 9 disfluencies compared with 97 second of gaze avoidance). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics on behavioral disruptions.

Transcripts of the videotapes were prepared to enhance accuracy and detail of the behavioral coding. Two observers coded behaviors on each interaction and were trained using exact descriptions of each type of BD, practice tapes, and discussion of observable behaviors. Training continued until coders consistently reached a 75% level of agreement.

Both inter- and intra-coder reliability were assessed. Inter-rater reliabilities using the Spearman-Brown coefficient were .98 for pauses, .99 for gaze avoidance, .98 for disfluencies, and .97 for disclaimers. Three weeks after the coding was completed, two video-tapes were randomly chosen and re-coded by the same raters. The obtained test-retest coefficient was .99 for each coder. Thus, the two coders were highly consistent with each other and over time.

Confederates

The two confederates were females of average height, weight, and attractiveness. They were casually dressed and randomly assigned to dyads. The decision to employ confederates in this project was based on the need to maintain a consistent interaction pattern with all subjects rather than to allow conversational "matching" to cloud the focus on subjects' performance (See Cappella 1979, 1980). Thus, female confederates, trained in delivering consistent performances and turning over control of the conversation whenever possible and polite, provided similar interaction partners across all dyads. This allowed analysis to focus on behavioral variations in the subjects.2

Pilot interactions were videotaped for feedback to the confederates and their behavior was monitored for consistency during the study. Potential confederate effects on the dependent variables were investigated by ANOVA after the study. There were no statistically significant effects due to confederate.

Results

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the best predictors of behavioral disruption in the dyadic interactions. The equation included all independent variables and their interactions. The overall model was statistically significant, $F = 2.69$ (15,63), $p = .003$ and accounted for 38% of the variance in behavioral disruption, thus warranting further analysis of main effects and interactions (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).3 There was a simple effect for TASK on BD, $F = 4.98$ (1,63), $p < .05$ with a significant 3-way interaction of CA, task structure, and evaluation, $F = 8.12$ (1,63) $p < .01$.

As expected based on previous research, EVAL interacted with CA such that

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the behavior of low CA's was influenced very little by the prospect of either having tapes for feedback only or to be judged and shown in classes. High CA subjects, on the other hand, reacted strongly to evaluation in the setting. When EVAL was high they were ver disrupted, but in low EVAL conditions their communication resembled the "release" Arkin and Schumann noted when shy subjects were put in a no-lose situation (1983).

Of particular interest to this project was the significant two-way interaction of CA by TASK, $F = 6.93$ (1,63), $p < .05$. The interaction was such that structure reduced behavioral disruptions among anxious subjects, i.e. when given more guidance higher CA subjects performed better. However, the structured communication task resulted in an INCREASE in disruption among less anxious subjects. Thus, high CA subjects were helped by additional structure in the dyadic assignment as predicted, but the low CA subjects appeared hindered by the structure and actually communicated less competently.

Clearly the results indicate that communication performance is variably influenced by evaluation potential in the situation and the amount of structure of the task. High CA's communication was disrupted by evaluation, but less so if structure provided guidance. Low CA's were less debilitated by evaluation, but showed more BD on a highly structured task.

Discussion and Implications

When teaching students at the high and low ends of the apprehension continuum we are dealing with students with distinctly different needs regarding communication learning and performance. Highly anxious students appear to need a supportive climate with more assignment structure to enhance their performance. By comparison, non-anxious students appear to communicate more competently when given unstructured tasks, ones which they can direct themselves. While one study does not fully explain any phenomenon and since this study investigated dyadic interaction, it is possible that structure has a different impact in public speaking or group contexts. However, these results reinforce existing statements on the need for structure and the potential harm of evaluation among CA subjects. The finding of inhibitory effects of structure on non-apprehensive students provides substance for new research in the field.

A possible explanation for the differing task needs may be in the restricted repertoire of communication skills available to apprehensive students. Phillips and Metzger (1973) note that reticent students seem unable toselect strategies for dealing effectively with communicative situations. This was supported by Greene and Sparks (1983) who suggested that apprehensive people have greater difficulty in assembling cognitive representations of the anticipated interaction. Further, Stafford and Daly (1984) and Daly, Bell, Glen, and Lawrence (1985) found that communication apprehension negatively effected a person's ability to recall and to differentiate among communication events in which they had participated. Therefore, apprehensive students may need structure provided in the situation because they either do not have a wide variety of communicative experiences upon which to draw or they have difficulty envisioning and constructing a competent communicative interaction. Additional structure guides high CA's search for competent communication strategies so they do not flounder.

Low CA students, by contrast, have more extensive recall and differentiation

among communication strategies (Stafford & daly, 1984; Daly, et al., 1985). Douglas (1983) also found that low CA's have well developed communication scripts for effective interactions. They have undoubtedly experienced success in using the strategies within their repertoire. Therefore when structure is imposed it may impede low CA's practiced manner of communicating and lead to behavioral disruption.

Suggestions for Task Adaptation

This divergence between high and low CA students has implications for communication educators. A key to dealing with students' needs may be in providing alternate assignments, though not assignments which allow decreased participation or neglect competence evaluations since either strategy could retard development of effective communication skills. A preferable direction for flexible assignments centers around task structure. Communication assignments can be designed so that structure is added to guide those students who need it most and yet not inhibit the performance of non-anxious students. The following paragraphs offer examples for dyadic, public speaking, and group assignments.

The dyadic tasks employed in this study are examples of comparable assignments. The structured and the unstructured dyads could be used in almost any classroom. The structure-added version could be assigned to anxious students and the more abstract version to non-anxious students. (See Figure 1).

Similarly, in the public speaking context two versions of the same speech assignment can be available to students. The instructor can develop and assign an unstructured version, following the basic objectives for each presentation. Options that students MAY want to include could then be offered as extensions to the basic format. Alternately, if the instructor anticipates difficulties with students' perceptions of the assignments both versions could be presented to all students with encouragement to adopt and employ only as many extensions as they felt comfortable incorporating. It should be emphasized that students may prefer more or less structure, but that neither format will affect the grade. Figure 2 contains exmples of a reduced-structure and a structure-added speaking assignment.

Group discussion assignments are more complex because there may be both high and low CA students within the same group. In such cases low CA students may help build the structure and thus assist high CA students. It may also be advantageous to provide several fairly structured examples, either in the form of several fairly structured examples, either in the form of discussion outlines, formats, or videotaped examples. After presenting the structure-added version, the basic criteria can be assigned and each group allowed to make decisions on what to use (or discard) from the details provided.

Figure 3 provides an example of a highly structured format for a panel discussion. The basic requirements around which this group assignment is centered may include:

1. The purpose of the discussion is to share information; it is not a win-lose interaction.
2. The discussion topic must be controversial, that is have at least two clear perspectives on the issue.
3. The group members should participate equally in the discussion.

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4. The discussion should last 45 minutes.
5. There should be interaction among participants and with the audience.
6. All topic claims should be supported by evidence.
7. The group members should reach some conclusions concerning the problem/issue.

Additional Considerations

There are several things to keep in mind if you plan on using structure-added assignments in a communication class. First, remember that the "options" provided in the structure-added versions of assignments are just that - options. They are not components that you believe need to be included in all presentations. Since an instructor must put more effort into developing the options there may be a tendency to think that these are the "best" ways of structuring a performance. This subtle opinion may penalize non-anxious students who opt not to employ such "suggestions".

Second, both the reduced-structure and the structure-added versions must be equivalent assignments. Avoid changing the focus when adding components. For that reason it may be better to begin designing the assignment with a fully-developed version and abstract the reduced version from it. In this way the reduced version is more likely to remain representative of the structure-added assignment.

Third, try to keep the options provided for anxious students truly flexible. They should not constitute alternate outlines for the presentation. Such "sample outlines" are found in many standard textbooks and serve a different purpose than the options suggested here. Instead, the added structure should offer suggestions which stimulate further thinking, adaptation, and construction of interactions by students who need to increase their repertoire of communication strategies.

Finally, be aware that a reduced-structure versus a structure-added assignment may result in differing types of presentations. This is due not only to the structure of the task but also to the type of person who chooses to follow each. If one goal is to stimulate thinking and develop effective communicative performances then the instructor must remain open to a variety of student presentations. If a presentation is not precisely what you expected, the basis for evaluation should be the extent to which the presentation meets the criteria set forth for that assignment. If presentations become too "eccentric" this problem can be addressed in the required components. For instance stating that, "Presentations must be appropriate for an audience of business owners from your home town," should sufficiently narrow the range of student presentations. In any event, the instructor should avoid criticizing aspects of a performance that represent an unanticipated interpretation of the stated criteria.

Employing variable structure assignments may not be the simplest way to deal with high and low apprehensive students. This method requires careful planning and consideration of both versions of the tasks. However, consideration of the issues of task comparability, flexible options, and student creativity can help avoid subtle bias or pitfalls in the method.

Summary

The ideas presented here are aimed at enhancing communication learning experiences for both apprehensive and non-apprehensive students. Offering anxiety treatment programs and providing warm supportive classroom climates can be helpful, but probably will not eliminate the problem of student apprehension and disparities among apprehension levels within a classroom. The described study and supporting literature indicate that anxious students' performances may benefit from fully guided assignments. Students who are not apprehensive however, do not need extensive structure and may communicate LESS competently under highly structured conditions.

Since assignment specificity is typically within the control of individual classroom teachers, this is an area of communicative behavior upon which teachers can have direct impact. Reduced-structure and structure-added assignments allow students the flexibility they desire and still provide more apprehensive students the structure they need so that all groups can learn to communicate more effectively.

Reference Notes

1. For complete information on task development, stimulus validation, and pilot testing contact the author.

2. Adequate precedent exists for the use of female confederates in research. See for instance, Steffen and Redden, 1977 or Wiemann, 1977. The potential interaction of sex and behavior was examined by ANOVA. There were no significant differences in any of the behaviors under study due to the sex of the subject. Therefore confederate gender did not systematically influence subjects' behavior.

3. This analysis was conducted as part of the author's dissertation. The results most salient to this research question are reported here, but for additional information contact the author or see Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (in press).

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Table 1

Behavioral Disruptions - Descriptive Statistics

(z Scores)

Behavior	Mean	Standard Deviation
Word Count	.00002	.999
Gaze Avoidance	.00007	1.000
Pauses	.00066	1.001
Disclaimers	.0461	1.12
Disfluencies	.5543	1.123
Overall Behavioral Disruption	.008	2.8

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Figure One

Dyadic Tasks

Structured

When people meet each other for the first time....

People are happiest when....

When someone is in a relationship, they should....

Most people dislike_____in others.

Dealing with emotion is....

When people are alone they....

Facing new situations can be....

Conflict in a relationship....

Most people don't understand....

A lot of people want_____in life.

People usually fear....

Most people I know look forward to....

Relationship commitment is....

Unstructured

Emotions

First impressions

Happiness and goals in life

Relationship expectations

Relationship conflict

Fears and dislikes

Figure Two

Required components for a public presentation (Reduced-structure)

The speech must:

1. have current impact
2. cite two outside sources
3. be 3-6 minutes long
4. effectively employ chronological or topical organization

The Structure-added version may include the following, as well as the basic required components.

1.	current impact	- it has appeared in the media in the past 2 years - it may be a local problem, (or state, national, or international) - it should not be "trivial", but may be creative - it may be a life-style trend - it may be a business concern - it may have health implications
2.	cite 2 sources	- may be library-based, interviews, personal experience if qualified, family business, TV news shows - may be different sources or same type - may include pertinent details about source (date, author, qualifications, background) - may not include use of dictionary
3.	3-6 minutes	- it it's 3 when you practice it may be shorter when you actually perform it - include "optional" note cards which you can use if you have time but are not essential to your main points
4.	effective organization	- 2-3 major ideas about your topic - transitions between major points such as (my second point..., in contrast we see..., finally..., another area of interest...) - introduction should contain thesis and preview - intro should be 3-4 sentences, inclusion should be 3-4 sentences - intro and conclusion may have the same theme (begin with an example and go back to it at the end)

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Figure Three

Structured Group Discussion *

Group Preparation:

1. Topic selection;
   a. not too broad or general
   b. avoid questions with "yes/no" answers
   c. focus question

2. Research - collect material together, then specialize

3. Should sound spontaneous; don't rehearse word for word

Presentation Agenda: 45 minutes

1. Introduction by moderator
   a. greeting and welcome
   b. introduction of topic (thesis, background, definitions, testimonies, exact question)
5) c. introduction of panelists
minutes)
   - first and last names
   - sequence (speaker order, right to left, pro - con, etc.)

2. Statement of intent by each panelist (1-1 1/2 minutes uninterrupted)

3. Kick-off question by moderator - to get discussion going

4. Free-flow discussion among panelists - don't wait to be called on
   a. getting information out (may be facts, statistics, examples, summaries, criticisms, sources, etc.)
   b. active listening - attend to what other panelists say, maybe take notes
20-25) c. questioning each other (clarification, additional support, challenge, information that you know the person has, lead into topic change)
minutes)
   d. leading to possible solutions (compromise? alternatives?)

10) 5. Open forum for questions from audience
minutes)

6. Closing statements - moderator
   a. summary of events
2-3) b. re-introduction of panelists
minutes) c. topic conclusion

* It may be helpful to have additional hand-outs or materials that help clarify group roles, procedures, and delivery style.

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